



## Consumer Group Keeps Watch on Funeral Industry.



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Byline: Paysha Stockton

Apr. 14--A shovel and a flashlight.

That's what Lisa Carlson, executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, jokes that family members really need to deposit the ashes of their dearly departed.

More elaborate cremation accessories -- the fancy urns, Lucite memorial plaques, \$500 urn vaults -- are often overpriced and exploit families' desires to provide loved ones with the "very best," Carlson said. "There's a lot of mischief out there," said Carlson, speaking to about 350 people at a sometimes-irreverent People's Memorial Association meeting yesterday.

"As the cremation rate increases and they're not getting the funerals, they're finding other ways (to make money)."

Carlson praised the Seattle memorial association for starting a simple-death movement that spread across the country. The 63-year-old association, formed to address concerns about costly funeral practices, negotiates discounted cremation and burial services for its members. The Washington funeral industry doesn't have problems on the scale of a recent scandal in Georgia, said Thom Wert, association board president. (There, a crematorium operator left hundreds of bodies to decompose while providing families with fake ashes.)

That's due, in part, to the vigilance of the 150,000-member association, Wert said.

"We're doing our job," he said, nonetheless noting the group will step up activism on how local "fly-by-night" crematories price and provide services.

Washington has a few looming issues requiring activism, Carlson told the crowd.

Crematories, for instance, should be required to reimburse 100 percent of prepaid fees if people move, die elsewhere or simply change their minds about their death arrangements, she said. They

currently only reimburse 90 percent.

The state, unlike some others, also has no guaranteed fund to reimburse consumers scammed in prepaid funeral or cremation agreements, she said. The alliance recommends people save their money in the bank, rather than buying prepaid cremation or funeral plans that aren't totally refundable, she said.

Washington residents also have no way to legally name the person who will handle their death arrangements, Carlson said. The duties generally fall to the next of kin, which can cause family disputes. It's a problem for gay, lesbian and unmarried couples, she said. "We know we have a bunch of seniors living in sin," she told the mostly gray and giggling crowd.

Carlson spends much of her time pricing death services. A salesperson at one funeral home told her the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) prohibits tossing ashes into streams, telling her, "Cremated remains kill fish. There's a real reason for these urn vaults." She went straight to the local EPA office, where she learned the agency basically had no such concern. Such unethical sales pitches -- aimed at maximizing profits -- are rampant in the cremation industry nationwide, she said.

These issues are increasingly important to Washington consumers, as cremation gains popularity here. In 1980, about 29 percent of Washingtonians who died were cremated, according to the state Department of Licensing, the agency which regulates crematories. By 2000, the number had jumped to 57 percent.

There are 70 licensed crematories associated with funeral homes, cemeteries and other institutions statewide. The vast majority of states -- including Washington -- regulate funeral and cremation practices. In Washington, the Department of Licensing conducts surprise inspections. Consumer complaints are reported to the department and reviewed by the state's Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers or Cemetery Board. Both boards can levy fines or suspend licenses. Carlson said the best way to ensure a dignified death is to plan it yourself.

As for herself, she plans to avoid the whole urn-vault-products issue by being cremated and having her ashes buried in a plain pine box beneath an apple tree or in a flower garden, she said. She's already written a letter to her kids about it.

"When I die, I want the absolutely cheapest funeral you can arrange," she told her kids.

If you want to spend a ton of money on flowers for her, she urged them, do it while she's alive.

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